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13 Did Paul Abandon either Judaism or Monotheism?

MATTHEW V. NOVENSON

Did Socrates abandon Athenianness by propagating his controversial philosophy? Did the prophet Muhammad abandon Arabianness when he began to preach monotheism? We do not usually think about historical figures in this way, setting them over against their respective ancestral traditions. In the case of the apostle Paul, however, we do often think about him in this unusual way. The twofold question posed in this chapter (Did Paul abandon either Judaism or monotheism?) arises not so much from Paul's letters themselves as from his outsize place in subsequent religious history. Because historic Christianity is (a) trinitarian and (b) not Judaism, and because Paul has been widely understood as a, perhaps even *the*, founder of Christianity,¹ it has come to seem natural to ask whether these hallmarks of historic Christianity can be traced back to the apostle – that is, whether Paul himself abandoned either Judaism or monotheism in the course of his apostolic work. What is more, again because of his outsize place in subsequent religious history, although Paul never says in so many words that he renounces either Judaism or monotheism, some things that he does say in the letters have been taken by modern interpreters, both Jewish and Christian, to imply such a renunciation. In this chapter, we must look carefully at the passages that have been so taken and ask what they actually claim. Furthermore, we must interrogate what exactly is meant by 'Judaism' and 'monotheism', and what would count as a renunciation, deviation, departure, violation, compromise, or abandonment of either of these -isms. As in other aspects of the study of Paul, but even more so here, it is crucial to parse out what belongs to Paul and what belongs to his afterlives.²

¹ See, e.g., the classic statement of Adolf von Harnack, *What Is Christianity?*, trans. Thomas Bailey Saunders (New York: Harper, 1957 [1901]), 176–189.

² On this historical problem, see J. Albert Harrill, *Paul the Apostle: His Life and Legacy in Their Roman Context* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

DID PAUL ABANDON JUDAISM?

The modern commonplace according to which Paul is said to have abandoned Judaism is attested already in the first great modern critic of the Pauline letters, F. C. Baur. Writing in the early nineteenth century, Baur summarises Paul's gospel in this way: 'Christianity is the absolute religion, the religion of the spirit and of freedom, with regard to which Judaism belongs to an inferior standpoint, from which it must be classed with heathenism'.³ According to Baur (himself a Christian), Paul abandoned Judaism, and this was a good thing. By contrast, the late nineteenth-century Jewish critic Kaufmann Kohler agrees with Baur that Paul abandoned Judaism, but he regards this to be a bad thing. Kohler writes, 'His [Paul's] conception of life was not Jewish. Nor can his unparalleled animosity and hostility to Judaism as voiced in the Epistles be accounted for except upon the assumption that, while born a Jew, he was never in sympathy or in touch with the doctrines of the rabbinical schools'.⁴ As these examples illustrate, modern interpreters variously praise Paul or blame him for abandoning Judaism, but many agree that he did so.⁵

Their belief that he did so, however, is based on highly questionable assumptions about the supposed essences of Judaism and of Christianity and about how each came to be. In particular, it presupposes a sufficiently clear and simple concept of Judaism, from which Paul can then be shown to have deviated. For much of the modern history of research, this presupposition mostly went unchallenged, but recently it has met with some forceful objections.⁶ In some recent research, it has been argued that ancient Jewish belief and practice were so diverse that we can only speak of Judaisms (plural), not Judaism (singular).⁷ Meanwhile, and in an opposite direction, it has been argued that Judaism did not

³ F. C. Baur, *Paul the Apostle of Jesus Christ*, vol. 1, trans. Eduard Zeller and rev. A. Menzies (London: Williams & Norgate, 1876 [1845]), 255.

⁴ Kaufmann Kohler, "Saul of Tarsus," in *Jewish Encyclopedia*, vol. 11 (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1906), 80.

⁵ See further Daniel R. Langton, *The Apostle Paul in the Jewish Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Patrick Gray, *Paul as a Problem in History and Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2016).

⁶ Against cultural essentialism, see especially Kathy Ehrensperger, *Paul at the Crossroads of Cultures: Theologizing in the Space Between* (London: T&T Clark, 2013).

⁷ See Jacob Neusner, "Preface," in *Judaisms and Their Messiahs at the Turn of the Christian Era*, eds. Jacob Neusner et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), ix–xiv.

exist at all in antiquity,⁸ or, more ambitiously still, that not even religion existed in antiquity.⁹ Now, in fact, such arguments pertain not to the social practices that we call 'Judaism' or 'religion', but to the concepts. That is to say, virtually no one denies that ancient Jews, for instance, worshiped the deity resident in the Jerusalem temple, but some historians argue that those ancient Jews lacked the concept 'Judaism' for what they were doing.¹⁰ This lattermost possibility is potentially relevant to the case of Paul, because Christian theology has long looked to Paul for a reification of, and principled rejection of, Judaism. Let us consider the evidence of Paul's own letters, examining what he does and does not say about his ancestral religion.

The Greek word *Ioudaismos*, from which we get our English word 'Judaism', occurs only twice in the twenty-seven books of the New Testament, both instances in the same passage at the beginning of Paul's Letter to the Galatians. Explaining why his audience should trust that his message came from God, not humans, Paul writes, 'For you heard of my former occupation in *Ioudaismos*, that I was indicting the assembly of God severely, and was besieging it. And I was advancing in *Ioudaismos* beyond many of my contemporaries among my people, being exceedingly zealous for my ancestral traditions. But when God was pleased to reveal his son in me . . . I went away into Arabia and then returned again to Damascus' (Gal 1:13–14). The point here is that Paul's well-known about-face confirms the divine origin of his message, showing that he was not just an understudy of the chief apostles in Jerusalem. But Paul characterises his former occupation (*anastrophe*) as being 'in *Ioudaismos*', from which we get (via a harmonization with the Damascus Road story in Acts 9) our centuries-long habit of thinking of Paul as a convert from Judaism to Christianity.¹¹ Contrary to this habit of thought, however, Paul himself never speaks of Christianity, or even of Christians.¹² What is more, Greek *Ioudaismos* does not mean, as 'Judaism' does in English, the religion of Jewish people. Paul calls the

⁸ See Daniel Boyarin, *Judaism: The Genealogy of a Modern Notion* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2018).

⁹ See Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013).

¹⁰ For a lucid analysis of these arguments, see Seth Schwartz, "How Many Judaism Were There?" *Journal of Ancient Judaism* 2 (2011): 208–238.

¹¹ For an interrogation of this habit, see Alan F. Segal, *Paul the Convert* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990).

¹² The word "Christian" first occurs in 1 Pet 4:16; Acts 11:26; 26:28; Pliny, *Epistles* 10.96–97; Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44; and the word "Christianity" in the early second-century letters of Ignatius of Antioch.

religion of Jewish people 'the ancestral traditions' (Gal 1:14), which is what most ancient people called their respective religions, since they lacked specific names for those religions. *Ioudaismos*, by contrast, is what Paul calls his own exceptional activist program for the defence and promotion of those traditions (which is also what *Ioudaismos* means in its few other instances in 2 Macc 2:21; 8:1; 14:38; 4 Macc 4:26). When Paul met the risen Christ, he abandoned that activist program, *Ioudaismos*, but he did not abandon his ancestral traditions, which are what we call Judaism.¹³

Those ancestral traditions include, for instance, belief in the God of Abraham as the creator of all things (Rom 1:25; 1 Cor 8:6), reverence for the law of Moses as God's revelation to Israel (Rom 9:4, 31; Gal 3:19, 24), cultic worship of God in his temple in Jerusalem (Rom 9:4; 1 Cor 10:18), and belief in the future resurrection of the dead (Rom 1:4; 1 Cor 15:12) and the kingdom of God (1 Cor 6:9–10; Gal 5:21). All of these hallmarks, and many more beside, Paul has in spades.¹⁴ Viewed from this angle, then, it is patently absurd to speak of Paul 'abandoning Judaism', since he shares virtually all of the essential features attested by other ancients whom we count as representing Judaism: the Qumran sect, Philo of Alexandria, Flavius Josephus, the sages of the Mishnah, and so on. The problem, if there is one, is not that Paul lacks any essential features of Judaism, but that, on top of these essential features, Paul also attests other features that later interpreters have thought put him beyond the pale. He attributes to the law of Moses a role in working wrath and effecting death (Rom 4:15; 7:5; 1 Cor 15:56). He calls all kinds of human beings, gentiles as well as Jews, sons of God (Rom 8:14; Gal 3:26). He can speak of the crucified and raised messiah Jesus as if he were divine (Phil 2:6–11; 2 Cor 4:4). That Paul makes these moves is basically undisputed; the crucial question is whether they do in fact put him beyond the pale. Imagine, for the sake of argument, that we had only the letters of Paul and other texts extant during Paul's lifetime (meaning, importantly, none of the other texts that are part of the New Testament, let alone later Christian writers). In that case, arguably, it

¹³ See Matthew V. Novenson, "Paul's Former Occupation in *Ioudaismos*," in *Galatians and Christian Theology*, eds. Mark Elliott et al. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2014), 24–39.

¹⁴ See Alan F. Segal, "Paul's Jewish Presuppositions," in *The Cambridge Companion to St Paul*, ed. James D. G. Dunn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 159–172; Matthew V. Novenson, *Christ among the Messiahs: Christ Language in Paul and Messiah Language in Ancient Judaism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

would never occur to us to think that any of Paul's claims, even the more provocative ones, put him beyond, outside, or against Judaism. But of course, we do have the rest of the New Testament, and the works of Justin, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Origen, Chrysostom, Augustine, Jerome, and myriad other gentile Christian writers down to the present, almost all of whom count Paul's letters as Christian scripture and therefore cite Paul's words as representing Christianity. Under this tremendous weight of tradition, it becomes very difficult for any of us to read Paul's words as representing Paul's own religion as opposed to the religion of his later Christian tradents.¹⁵

Faced with this difficulty, one promising way forward is to ask whether Paul was in fact treated by others, during his own lifetime, as being beyond, outside, or against Judaism. From a social-scientific perspective, there is some evidence that Paul was regarded as deviant by other Jews who regarded themselves, and perhaps were regarded by others, as normal by comparison.¹⁶ In a litany of traumas suffered in the course of his apostolic work, Paul writes, 'Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes less one' (2 Cor 11:24), and a few lines later, 'in danger from my people, in danger from the gentiles' (2 Cor 11:26). The reference to 'danger from my people' could mean either unofficial hostility or official punishment, but the reference to 'the forty lashes less one' certainly points to formal synagogue discipline. Because the Torah had specified a maximum of forty lashes for corporal sentences (Deut 25:1–3), Jewish halakhah in the early Roman period allowed for discretionary punishments of up to thirty-nine lashes (*m. Makkot* 3). Diaspora synagogues will have made use of this provision in overseeing their internal affairs, of which the case of Paul is an example. For reasons he does not here detail but which had to do with the way his apostolic work was perceived by other Jews, Paul was subjected to synagogue discipline. This fact might seem to suggest a break between Paul and Judaism, but, as E. P. Sanders memorably put it, 'punishment implies inclusion'.¹⁷ To submit oneself to discipline is to be still inside the fold. Diaspora synagogues had no police power. Paul could have avoided

¹⁵ On this hermeneutical problem, see the essays collected in *Paul within Judaism: Restoring the First-Century Context to the Apostle*, eds. Mark D. Nanos and Magnus Zetterholm (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015); and *Paul the Jew: Rereading the Apostle as a Figure of Second Temple Judaism*, eds. Gabriele Boccaccini and Carlos A. Segovia (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2016).

¹⁶ See John M. G. Barclay, "Deviance and Apostasy: Some Applications of Deviance Theory to First-Century Judaism and Christianity," in *Pauline Churches and Diaspora Jews* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 123–139.

corporal punishment by absenting himself from the life of the synagogue. We know of other ancient Jews who took this step (see the famous case of Tiberius Julius Alexander in Josephus, *Antiquities* 20.100). Evidently, however, Paul did not do so. He stayed, and he was allowed to stay. Even in these episodes of severe social disapproval, then, Paul operated within Judaism rather than outside its bounds.

Why, though, this social disapproval? What did Paul do that would have warranted synagogue punishment? He himself does not say, so interpreters have had to fill in the gaps, which they have done with zeal. One passage often invoked in this connection is a part of 1 Corinthians 9 where Paul puts himself forward as a model of accommodation to the needs of others (1 Cor 9:19–22):

Although I am free from all people, I have enslaved myself to them all, so that I may gain more. To the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain Jews. To those under the law, as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), that I might gain those under the law. To the lawless, as a lawless person (though I am not lawless with God but am in the law of Christ), that I might gain the lawless. To the weak I became a weak person, that I might gain the weak. To all people I have become all things, so that by all means I might save some.

In the wider context of 1 Corinthians 8–10, Paul's point is to persuade his gentile auditors to adjust their dietary habits to accommodate the weaker consciences of other Christ-believers, lest anyone be tempted to commit idolatry. This is the context for his saying, 'I have enslaved myself to all people', and 'To all people I have become all things'.¹⁸ It is striking, though, that one of the groups about whom he says that he became like them is the Jews. Striking because Paul is himself a Jew; hence it is hard to see why he would have to 'become as a Jew'. Perhaps Paul was usually in the habit, as he says Cephas was in Galatians 2, of 'living gentily' (Gal 2:14) – that is, of observing his Jewish diet and holy days in a manner that was workable in great gentile cities like Antioch or Tarsus (e.g., by eating in gentile homes even in the presence of household gods). Such practice was probably quite common among

¹⁷ E. P. Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 192.

¹⁸ See Margaret M. Mitchell, "Pauline Accommodation and 'Condescension' (ΣΥΓΚΑΤΑΒΑΣΙΣ): 1 Cor 9:19–23 and the History of Influence," in *Paul beyond the Judaism/Hellenism Divide*, ed. Troels Engberg-Pedersen (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 197–214.

Jews in the Diaspora, even if some Jerusalemite Jews might have found it scandalous (e.g., Gal 2:12). If so, then 'to become as a Jew' might mean to set aside one's Diaspora halakhah and adopt a Judean halakhah when in the company of Judeans (which is precisely what Paul shames Cephas for doing in Galatians 2, though in that case because gentiles-in-Christ were watching).¹⁹

'Living gentily', then, is unlikely to have been the reason for Paul's punishment at the hands of synagogue authorities. A more plausible explanation, developed in particular by Martin Goodman, is that Paul was putting the already vulnerable Diaspora Jewish communities at risk from their gentile neighbours by recruiting gentiles into his Jewish movement and then teaching them to renounce their obligations to their civic and family gods.²⁰ This would have looked like Jewish promotion of impiety among gentiles, an understandable cause of outrage among the locals and a public relations nightmare for synagogue leaders, who would have used the means at their disposal to keep a self-authorised charismatic like Paul in line, for the health and safety of the community.

In social terms, then, Paul did not abandon Judaism, but what about in theological terms? In particular, what about the offence of the crucified Christ (1 Cor 1:23)? To be sure, Paul mourns that most of his co-ethnics do not recognise 'the glory of God in the face of Christ' (2 Cor 4:6) as he does. From his perspective, the majority of Jews 'have zeal for God, but not with recognition' (Rom 10:2), about which, Paul writes earnestly, he feels 'great pain and constant anguish' (Rom 9:2). Unlike the later Christian treatises *adversus Iudaeos*, 'against the Jews', however, Paul does not diagnose this as a symptom of some flaw inherent in Judaism itself. As noted above, unlike many later Christian thinkers, Paul does not reify and isolate Judaism as a thing at all; like most of his contemporaries, he only thinks in terms of 'ancestral traditions', whether Jewish, Greek, Roman, or what have you.

When he comments on majority Jewish 'distrust' or 'unbelief' (*apistia*), Paul either simply notes it without any attempt at explanation or he explains it with reference to a mysterious divine purpose. When he himself reads the law and the prophets, of course, Paul sees the messiah

¹⁹ See further David J. Rudolph, *A Jew to the Jews: Jewish Contours of Pauline Flexibility in 1 Corinthians 9:19–23*, 2nd ed. (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2016).

²⁰ See Martin Goodman, "The Persecution of Paul by Diaspora Jews," in *The Beginnings of Christianity*, eds. Jack Pastor, and Menachem Mor (Jerusalem: Yad ben Zvi, 2005), 379–387; and similarly Paula Fredriksen, *Paul: The Pagans' Apostle* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), 77–93.

Jesus plainly attested there (Rom 3:21). But he is enough of a realist to admit that when most other Jews read the same scriptures, they do not see what he sees, and this because, he says, 'their thoughts were hardened' and 'a veil lies over their heart' (2 Cor 3:14–15). In the Letter to the Romans, Paul attributes this noetic hardening to the agency of God himself. Quoting Isaiah, Paul writes, 'God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes not to see and ears not to hear' (Rom 11:8 citing Isa 29:10). Why would God do such a thing? Well, Paul reasons, it is an eschatological necessity that God should have mercy on all people. Gentiles had always been disobedient ('by nature', Gal 2:15), so now, quite straightforwardly, God can have mercy on them. Jews, however, had always been mostly obedient; hence God has *made* them temporarily disobedient now so that he can very soon have mercy on them, too (Rom 11:30–32). This explanation may seem strange, but then, the phenomenon Paul was trying to explain was itself strange: the Jewish messiah had appeared, but only gentiles, not Jews (for the most part), were bowing the knee to him. Desperate times call for desperate explanatory measures. None of this, however, amounts to abandoning Judaism. In fact, Romans 11 is nothing if not a manifesto against abandonment. 'The gifts and the call of God are irrevocable' (Rom 11:29). Paul can no more abandon Israel than God can.²¹

The grain of truth in the old saw that Paul abandoned Judaism is the fact that Paul does sometimes speak of abandoning, or being estranged from, the entire world as we know it. Through the cross of Christ, he says, 'the cosmos was crucified to me, and I to the cosmos' (Gal 6:14). Because of Christ, Paul abandons the cosmos, the universe, life itself, which technically does include (conventional, everyday) Judaism, although that is not Paul's point.²² A similar logic is at work in another well-known passage in Philippians (3:4–9):

If anyone else thinks that he has confidence in the flesh, I more so: an eighth-day circumcision, from the race of Israel, the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born from Hebrews, in respect of the law a Pharisee, in respect of zeal indicting the assembly, in respect of righteousness in the law blameless. But whatever things were gains to me, these things I consider loss on account of Christ. What is more, I consider all things to be loss on account of the superiority of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my lord, on whose

²¹ On this point, see the essays collected in *God and Israel: Providence and Purpose in Romans 9–11*, ed. Todd D. Still (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2017).

²² See Beverly Roberts Gaventa, "The Singularity of the Gospel," in *Our Mother Saint Paul* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 101–112.

account I suffered the loss of all things, and I consider them excrement, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having my own righteousness from the law but that which is through Christ-faith, righteousness from God, upon faith.

Historians are grateful for these few, brief autobiographical details (e.g., Paul's Pharisaic affiliation), but Paul only includes them here because apparently some rival preachers have been touting their own credentials (Phil 3:2–4). Paul one-ups these rivals by citing his own superior credentials but then undermines the whole contest by declaring all such things worthless in comparison to Christ. To be sure, this is an emphatic devaluation of certain aspects of Paul's Jewishness, but, crucially, it is a devaluation relative to other aspects of Paul's Jewishness. The comparison is not between Judaism and Christianity (the latter concept being not yet available to Paul), but between Jewish piety in the present evil age and Jewish mythology about the perfect age to come, or in other words, between everyday Judaism and eschatological Judaism. If, in the new creation, Jews and gentiles alike are all sons and heirs of God, then Benjaminite ancestry is effectively superfluous. If, in the new creation, everyone is perfectly righteous all the time, then conventional law observance, repentance, atonement, etc. are likewise effectively superfluous. And so on.

Which brings us to one final passage that has been widely taken to be a direct renunciation of Judaism: 'Through the law, I died to the law, that I might live to God. I have been crucified together with Christ; I am no longer alive, but Christ is alive in me' (Gal 2:19–20). Many interpreters have assumed that no good Jew could write the sentence, 'I died to the law'; hence many Jewish interpreters have scolded Paul for writing it, even as many Christian interpreters have praised him for writing it (e.g., Kohler and Baur, respectively, both cited above). But their shared assumption about what a Jew would or would not say is simply false. Jews can express and have expressed sentiments like this not infrequently in the long history of Judaism.²³ In particular, apocalyptic Jews (Jews who thought they were actually living at the end of the present age and the dawn of the age to come) have expressed, and indeed acted upon, sentiments like this.²⁴ Such people do of course sound strange relative

²³ See Joshua Garroway, "Paul: Within Judaism, without Law," in *Law and Lawlessness in Early Judaism and Christianity*, eds. David Lincicum et al. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019).

²⁴ See the examples documented in Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken, 1995 [1946]); Gershom Scholem, *The Messianic*

to conventional, majority piety, but they are an important part of the history of Judaism, not to mention the history of religions more generally. Paul's point about 'dying to the law' is not that the law makes for a bad kind of religion, but that the entire age of sin and death (over which the law exercised benevolent jurisdiction) is now over. 'Living to God' here refers not to Christianity (which Paul did not live to see), but to the immortal, pneumatic life of the age to come. Or, to put it another way: Had Paul known of such a thing as Christianity, he would have said that he had died to that, too.

DID PAUL ABANDON MONOTHEISM?

We can think of our second question (Did Paul abandon monotheism?) as a subset of the first (Did Paul abandon Judaism?). We can think of it in this way because, in much modern discussion of the issue, monotheism has been thought to be a defining characteristic of Judaism, upon which Paul's Christology (i.e., his understanding of Jesus) supposedly infringed in one way or another. In fact, as we shall see, there are problems with both halves of this assumption, but its basic logic is clear enough. Thus, for instance, Kaufmann Kohler (cited above in connection with Paul and Judaism) writes about Paul and monotheism as follows: "To a Jewish mind trained by rabbinical acumen, this [viz. Paul's argument in Romans 5–8] is not pure monotheistic, but mythological, thinking. Paul's "Son of God" is, far more than the Logos of Philo, an infringement of the absolute unity of God'.²⁵ While historic Judaism does not have and does not need anything quite like the ancient Christian creeds (e.g., the Nicene Creed), it has long been noted that the Shema (the confession of the oneness of God from the Torah) has at least a broadly analogous kind of status: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one' (Deut 6:4). Making this confession is among the most fundamental acts of Jewish piety, still performed morning and evening by Jews everywhere, down to the present. Its symbolic power is attested, for instance, by the famous story of the martyr Rabbi Akiba, who endured Roman torture and died with the Shema on his lips (*b. Ber.* 61b). To balk at confessing the Shema would be to put a question mark to one's Jewishness.

Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality (New York: Schocken, 1995 [1971]); and the example *par excellence* detailed in Gershom Scholem, *Sabbatai Zevi: Mystical Messiah, 1626–1676*, trans. R. J. Zwi Werblowsky (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1973).

²⁵ Kohler, "Saul of Tarsus," 83.

Does Paul balk at confessing the Shema? On the face of it, certainly not. Several times, in fact, he confesses it explicitly. In Galatians 3, Paul appeals to the oneness of God to explain the priority of God's promise to Abraham over God's giving of the law to Israel at Mount Sinai. He writes (Gal 3:19–20):

Why then the law? It was added on account of transgressions – until such time as the seed should come to whom the promise was made – arranged through angels, in the hand of a mediator. The mediator is not of one, but God is one.

There are several puzzling aspects to this passage, but the central claim is clear. The oneness of God, which Paul takes as axiomatic, corresponds to God's very ancient promise to Abraham, which God made face to face and without the aid of a mediator.²⁶ In Romans 3, Paul again appeals to the oneness of God by way of establishing another theological point: the principle that God must justify gentiles in the same way that he justifies Jews. 'If God, who will justify the circumcision from faith, is one, [he will justify] also the foreskin through faith' (Rom 3:30). *Heis ho theos*, 'God is one'. Therefore, Paul reasons, God cannot have two different strategies for justification, one for Jews and another for gentiles.²⁷ Here again, Paul solves a theological problem by appealing to the axiom of the oneness of God.

As with the discussion of Judaism above, so with the Shema. The problem is not that Paul ever voices any doubts about the oneness of God; he does not. In fact, he pointedly affirms it. The problem, if there is one, is that Paul also says some things about Jesus that later interpreters have thought *should* have made Paul balk at confessing the Shema. According to these interpreters, Paul himself may not have recognised that he had abandoned monotheism, but he had in fact abandoned it. A key text here is Paul's third express citation of the Shema, where he is answering the question whether it is permissible for gentiles-in-Christ to eat meat that had previously been sacrificed to idols (1 Cor 8:4–6).²⁸

²⁶ On this verse, see Francis Watson, *Paul and the Hermeneutics of Faith*, 2nd ed. (London: T&T Clark, 2016 [2004]), 256–258.

²⁷ On this verse, see Richard B. Hays, "Have We Found Abraham to Be Our Forefather according to the Flesh? A Reconsideration of Rom 4:1," *Novum Testamentum* 27 (1985): 83–85.

²⁸ On the occasion and the argument of this passage, see the discussion in Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003 [1983]), 140–163.

So then, concerning the eating of idol sacrifices: we know that an idol is nothing in the cosmos, and that there is no god but one. For if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth – as indeed there are many gods and many lords – nevertheless for us there is one god the father, from whom are all things, and we are for him, and one lord Jesus Christ, through whom are all things, and we are through him.

On the one hand, Paul here once again affirms Deuteronomic orthodoxy ('there is no god but one') but, on the other hand, he also concedes the existence of many other gods and lords ('so-called gods', perhaps, but gods nonetheless). According to Paul, idols, which are the cult statues of gentile deities, are nothing at all. But the deities themselves do exist, as Paul reaffirms at the end of his discourse on idol sacrifices: 'What [gentiles] sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons and not to God' (1 Cor 10:20). Unlike idols, Paul reckons, demons, gods, and lords are real things in the cosmos.

What is more, one of these other lords, namely Jesus, Paul also adds to his formulaic confession of divine oneness: 'For us there is one God the father *and* one lord Jesus Christ'.²⁹ Paul calls Christ a lord, not a god, which is interesting and perhaps significant (see further below), but God does at least now have a divine lieutenant, the messiah Jesus. The phrase 'for us' signifies that here Paul is talking about devotion, not ontology. The point, in other words, is not that no other divine beings exist except God and Christ, but rather that only God and Christ are worthy of devotion from Paul and his coreligionists.³⁰ Gentiles in their natural state may sacrifice to demons, but 'for us' there is only God and Christ. This is what is often called monolatry (as opposed to monotheism) in the secondary literature. If monotheism means belief in the existence of only one divine being and no others, monolatry means the reservation of worship for one divine being, even if other divine beings may exist. Monolatry is often (but need not be) coordinated with henotheism – that is, belief in the existence of a pyramid of divine beings with one higher than all the rest. These additional terms give us access to very helpful distinctions that we would lack if we only had the term monotheism, but unfortunately, many scholars (not to

²⁹ See N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992), 120–136.

³⁰ The usefulness of this devotion-versus-ontology distinction is illustrated on a large scale by Larry W. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003).

mention lay people) do not avail themselves of these distinctions. Many persist in using just the one word 'monotheism' for a number of quite different phenomena. Or they create their own bespoke distinctions, such as William Horbury's distinction between exclusive monotheism (which denies the existence of all gods but one) and inclusive monotheism (which allows that other gods exist but ranks them below the high god),³¹ or Angelos Chaniotis's distinction between monotheism and megatheism.³² Ideally, when discussing these complicated matters, we should be maximally precise while also using terms that are intelligible to the largest possible number of people. Along these lines, we might say that, in 1 Corinthians 8, Paul starts by striking an apparently monotheistic note ('there is no god but one'), but as he goes on it emerges that his position is perhaps better described as henotheistic and monolatrous (or, perhaps better, duolatrous): There are many gods and lords in the cosmos, but one father God is above them all, and only he and his son the messiah are worthy of devotion in Paul's assemblies.

This passage fits with a pattern whereby Paul often speaks of Christ in ways that ancients would recognise as ways one would speak of a god (invoking him, acclaiming him, delivering oracles from him, celebrating him in a ritual meal, etc.)³³ but does not actually call Christ a god, or God. Paul overwhelmingly speaks of God as the father of Jesus (Rom 15:6; 2 Cor 1:3; 11:31), not as Jesus. And, correspondingly, he speaks of Jesus as the son of God, not as God. Admittedly, Titus 2:13 arguably does call Jesus a god: 'the appearing of the glory of our great god and savior Jesus Christ.' But Titus is (rightly) regarded by many scholars as a pseudepigraphon – that is, a letter attributed to Paul but actually written by someone else. In the undisputedly authentic Pauline letters, there is only one passage that might conceivably call Jesus God, and it probably does not do so. The passage is Rom 9:5, and the problem for translators is how to punctuate the sentence. It reads in one of two ways: either 'From the Israelites comes the messiah, according to the flesh, *who is* God over all, blessed forever, amen' or 'From the Israelites

³¹ William Horbury, "Jewish and Christian Monotheism in the Herodian Age," in *Herodian Judaism and New Testament Study* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 2–33.

³² Angelos Chaniotis, "Megatheism: The Search for the Almighty God and the Competition of Cults," in *One God: Pagan Monotheism in the Roman Empire*, eds. Stephen Mitchell and Peter van Nuffelen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 112–140.

³³ On this issue, see M. David Litwa, *Iesus Deus: The Early Christian Depiction of Jesus as a Mediterranean God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2014).

comes the messiah, according to the flesh. God who is over all be blessed forever, amen'. Either punctuation is technically possible. But the second rendering, where we have not one sentence but two, is arguably the more likely. It would be more consistent both with Paul's usual way of writing benedictions (Rom 1:25; 2 Cor 1:3; 11:31) and with his usage of the names 'God' and 'Christ' elsewhere.³⁴

If Paul's Christ is not identical with God the father, then what kind of divine being is he? Where, exactly, does Christ fit in Paul's cosmology? This turns out to be a rather difficult question, and it has generated a number of different, even conflicting, answers. Bart Ehrman has argued, for instance, that Paul thinks that Christ is an angel.³⁵ He points to Gal 4:14: 'You [Galatians] received me [Paul] as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus'. Ehrman takes the two parallel phrases as synonymous, but that is neither necessary nor (arguably) likely. Like an angel, Christ is a divine being who is not God the father, but there are things other than angels that fit these criteria. Elsewhere, Paul speaks of Christ much more like one would speak of a deified human being. Christ was born of a woman (Gal 4:4), from the bloodline of king David (Rom 1:3), but having died and then been raised by God, he is now immortal (Rom 6:9). These passages would seem to suggest a kind of deified king or hero (e.g., Hercules, Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar).³⁶ But here, too, there is more to it than that.

Paul's Christ is not identical with God, but he stands in a closer relation to God than any other divine being does. In the letters of Paul, angels and demons are called angels and demons, not 'sons of God', as they often are in the Hebrew Bible (e.g., Ps 29:1; 89:7; Job 38:7). For Paul, only Christ is the son of God, with the rule-proving exception of people who get joined to Christ and thereby become sons of God themselves (Rom 8:14, 19; 9:26; Gal 3:26; 4:6–7). Christ is, moreover, 'the image of God' (2 Cor 4:4), the visible representation of the invisible God (analogous to the measure of the heavenly body of God [*shi'ur qomah*] in late antique Jewish mysticism). God's glory (that is, his *kavod* or bodily

³⁴ This is how I, with many other interpreters, understand Romans 9:5. But for an exhaustive argument that Paul *does* in fact call Jesus God in this verse, see George Carraway, *Christ Is God Over All: Romans 9:5 in the Context of Romans 9–11* (London: T&T Clark, 2013).

³⁵ Bart D. Ehrman, *How Jesus Became God: The Exaltation of a Jewish Preacher from Galilee* (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 2014), 251–254.

³⁶ On this pattern, see in particular Michael Peppard, *The Son of God in the Roman World: Divine Sonship in Its Social and Political Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

presence) has always been hidden in his sanctuary in Jerusalem (Rom 9:4), but in the new creation, all human beings (not only priests but also laypeople, not only Jews but also gentiles) can attain 'knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ' (2 Cor 4:6). The divine *pneuma* (usually translated 'spirit') that people receive in the new creation is, at the same time, the *pneuma* of God and the *pneuma* of Christ (Rom 8:9). Paul's Christ is the son of God, the image of God, the face of God. These descriptions are tantalizingly brief, but in one passage Paul supplies a narrative within which their sense becomes a bit clearer (Phil 2:5–11):

Christ Jesus, who, although he was in the form of God, did not consider it as spoils to be equal with God, but he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being in the likeness of humans; and being found as a human in regard to figure, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to the point of death, the death of a cross. Therefore indeed God highly exalted him and gave him the name higher than every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of beings in heaven and on earth and in the underworld, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is lord to the glory of God the father.

In this fascinating passage, Christ is neither God nor human, exactly. He exists in the heavenly form of God, but his likeness and figure are human. He undergoes the quintessentially human experience of death (and thus is a mortal, strictly speaking), but he receives obeisance from human and superhuman beings like a high god would.³⁷ Like Metatron in the Jewish mystical text 3 *Enoch*, Christ in Philippians 2 is both a deified human being and the archangelic form of God.³⁸ If we recall that 'Christ' means messiah, then this is not as strange as it might at first seem. There were a number of types of messiahs in ancient Jewish imagination: priest, king, warrior, angel, and more. Nor is it at all uncommon to find features of different types mixed up in the sources, as we find in Philippians 2.

³⁷ Here, however, when *Christ* receives obeisance from human and superhuman beings, glory redounds to *God the father*, on which see further Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 151–153.

³⁸ See Gedaliahu G. Stroumsa, "Form(s) of God: Some Notes on Metatron and Christ," *Harvard Theological Review* 76 (1983): 269–288; Markus Bockmuehl, "'The Form of God' (Phil 2:6): Variations on a Theme of Jewish Mysticism," *Journal of Theological Studies* 48 (1997): 1–23.

Does any of this, though, put Paul in contravention of a Jewish doctrine of God? Paul himself certainly does not think so. Strenuously to the contrary, he thinks that his gospel calls gentiles away from idolatry to the worship of the one true God, just as other Jewish Greek texts like *Letter of Aristeas* or *Wisdom of Solomon* do. 'You turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, and to await his son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the coming wrath' (1 Thess 1:9). Of course, Paul speaks not only of 'the living and true God' but also of 'his son from heaven', which *Letter of Aristeas* and *Wisdom of Solomon* do not do. But as we have seen, the idea of a heavenly lieutenant (God's son, or messenger, or chosen one, or anointed one) who will execute judgement on God's behalf is not at all unusual in Jewish texts that speculate about such things.

The conventional way of putting the question, 'Did Paul abandon Jewish monotheism?' assumes that we know where Paul's Jewish contemporaries stood vis-à-vis monotheism, that they were all good, traditional monotheists, and the only question is whether Paul parted ways with them on this issue. But do we know that? We have a concept of monotheism, and we plausibly associate it with ancient Jews and their scriptures, but we often overlook the actual evidence for what Paul's contemporaries believed about God and other superhuman beings. As Paula Fredriksen has perceptively put it, in antiquity, even the monotheists were polytheists.³⁹ With a very few exceptions, mostly philosophers, in the ancient world virtually everyone (Jews, Greeks, Romans, Egyptians, Arabians, Gauls, Britons, and the rest) believed that the heavens teemed with superhuman beings: angels, demons, spirits, gods, demigods, stars, heroes, ancestors, and so on. Such beings existed and therefore merited due attention from humans, just as very powerful human beings (e.g., emperors, kings, patrons) would. So if 'monotheism' means denying the very existence of any superhuman beings save one, then there were almost no monotheists in antiquity. Certainly, most Jews were not monotheists in this sense. Our ancient Jewish texts are full of references to superhuman beings, many of them even having proper names such as Michael, Gabriel, Uriel, Raphael, Metatron, Samael, Azazel, Semihazah, Satan, Belial, Beelzebub, Asmodeus, Mastema, and many more. If we approach the question from this angle, then when we find Paul speaking not only of God and Christ but also of Satan, Belial, the god of this age, angels, demons, elements, spirits,

³⁹ Fredriksen, *Paul*, 12.

rulers, authorities, powers, and more,⁴⁰ Paul suddenly looks much more like his Jewish contemporaries (and his non-Jewish contemporaries, too, for that matter), ‘monotheist’ or not.⁴¹

In other words, although in the history of interpretation readers have been most anxious about whether Paul’s view of Christ compromised monotheism, they might have done just as well to direct their anxiety towards Paul’s view of other divine beings. Older scholarship often rushed to demythologise, metaphorise, or explain away these other beings, but recent scholarship has taken them more seriously and more realistically. The so-called apocalyptic school of Pauline interpretation has emphasised both the threat posed by ‘anti-God powers’ (especially sin and death) and God’s conquest over those powers in the death of Christ as features of Paul’s gospel.⁴² Meanwhile, from a history-of-religions perspective, other interpreters have asked whether Paul actually thinks of sin and death as demons, rulers, or authorities (see Rom 5:12–21) – that is, as particular named beings analogous to the Greek gods *Planē*, *Thanatos*, or *Hades*. In short, there is nowadays a greater interest in and patience with Paul’s frankly rather mythological cosmology, with all its many-colored divine beings.⁴³

It should be noted that Paul specifically classifies many of these divine beings as created things: ‘Neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things that are, nor things that shall be, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature [*ktisis*] shall be able to part us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our lord’ (Rom 8:38–39). So death, angels, powers, and rulers, at least, are created things, even if they are also superhuman (and thus divine in this latter sense). This illustrates once again a key point of confusion in the secondary literature: what exactly is meant by ‘god’ and ‘divine’. Some interpreters urge that these terms should only be used of the highest god, while others allow them for other superhuman, celestial beings, too. Both groups of interpreters can claim warrant from Paul, who, as we have seen, gives a complicated account. For Paul, ‘There is no god but one’ – that is, no

⁴⁰ See Rom 8:37–39; 16:20; 1 Cor 4:9; 5:5; 6:3; 7:5; 10:20–21; 11:10; 12:10; 13:1; 14:12, 32; 2 Cor 2:11; 4:4; 6:15; 11:14; 12:7; Gal 1:8; 3:19; 4:14; 1 Thess 2:18.

⁴¹ See further Loren T. Stuckenbruck, ‘“Angels” and “God”: Exploring the Limits of Early Jewish Monotheism,’ in *Early Christian and Jewish Monotheism*, eds. Loren T. Stuckenbruck and Wendy E. S. North (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 45–70.

⁴² See, e.g., Beverly Roberts Gaventa, ‘The Cosmic Power of Sin in Paul’s Letter to the Romans,’ *Interpretation* 58 (2004): 229–240.

⁴³ On this mythological aspect, see Emma Wasserman, *Apocalypse as Holy War: Divine Politics and Polemics in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018).

creator but one. At the same time, however, 'there are many gods and many lords' – that is, many angels, demons, rulers, powers, etc., including Satan, Belial, the god of this age, and Christ. But Christ, as we have also seen, is a special case. He is one of the lords that exist in the cosmos, but he is the one lord 'for us', as Paul emphasises. He is not God, but he is, uniquely, the son of God and the image of God. All things are *from* God the father, but all things are *through* Christ, which might suggest that Christ is not a *ktisis*, a creature. This is what Richard Bauckham means by speaking of 'Paul's Christology of divine identity'.⁴⁴ Christ, death, angels, and archons may all be superhuman beings, but in respect of creation, Christ is different from all these others. They are called *ktiseis*, creatures; Christ is not. Nevertheless, Paul says, at the end of all things, even Christ will ultimately be subordinated to God the father (1 Cor 15:28).⁴⁵

In sum, Paul was just as monotheistic as his Jewish contemporaries were, which is to say, moderately monotheistic by ancient standards, but not very monotheistic by medieval and modern standards. Like most ancient Jews, Paul differed from most ancient gentiles in regarding the deity resident in Jerusalem as the creator of all things, and in theoretically reserving cultic worship for him alone. Like almost everyone in antiquity, Jew or gentile, Paul also acknowledged the existence and agency of many other divine beings. Is this monotheistic? Perhaps it is, if we stretch the concept far enough to make it fit – for instance, by allowing an 'inclusive monotheism' in addition to the more familiar 'exclusive monotheism' (à la Horbury), or by stipulating that 'monotheism' means not belief in one god but belief in one creator (à la Bauckham). We are of course free to make moves like this, and there may be some good reasons (especially theological ones) for doing so. But we should also acknowledge that stretching the concept in this way makes it something other than what many people (e.g., modern Muslims, Jews, and nonreligious folk) recognise as monotheism. In any event, as the argument above has shown, it is not the case that the principle of monotheism was any kind of fault line separating Paul from other ancient Jews.

⁴⁴ Richard Bauckham, "Paul's Christology of Divine Identity," in *Jesus and the God of Israel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 182–232.

⁴⁵ These subtle Pauline distinctions are part of the inheritance of the late ancient Christians who developed the doctrine of the trinity, on which see Wesley Hill, *Paul and the Trinity: Persons, Relations, and the Pauline Letters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015).

CONCLUSION

For all of Socrates's conflict with the leadership of classical Athens, even to the point of his death at the hands of the state, we do not generally think of him as having abandoned Athenianness. Our intuition in the case of Socrates is right, and we should apply it also to the case of Paul. Did Paul abandon either Judaism or monotheism? We can take the latter part of the question first. Paul certainly did not abandon Judaism *by* abandoning monotheism, first because ancient Judaism itself was not monotheistic in the sense that most moderns mean that word, and second because Paul's cosmology actually agrees in most respects with the cosmologies of other ancient Jews. Like Deuteronomy, Ben Sira, Philo, and Josephus, Paul believes that the God of Abraham is the creator of the universe, but also that God is variously worshiped, assisted, and opposed by a host of lower deities. Like some (but not all) other ancient Jews, Paul believed that the messiah was one of these divine beings. So far, so conventional. The point on which most other ancient Jews disagreed with Paul (and with Peter, James, Barnabas, et al.) was the claim that the recently executed man Jesus was this messiah. That was an extreme minority opinion in ancient Judaism, but not because it was a different kind of thing from ancient Judaism.

But if not in respect of monotheism, did Paul nevertheless abandon Judaism in some other respect? Perhaps in respect of the law of Moses, since that is where modern interpreters have been most exercised? Again, at many points, what Paul says about the law agrees with what most other ancient Jews for whom we have evidence say about the law. God gave it to Moses on Mount Sinai. It is the patrimony of the Jews. It is altogether righteous. God has shown us how to fulfil it. And so on. In addition to these claims, however, Paul also makes some more controversial claims about the law. It works wrath. It effects death. It has jurisdiction over the present age but not over the age to come. It is powerless to bring about ultimate, eschatological righteousness. He, Paul, has died to it. It is in these claims that many modern interpreters have thought they have found Paul's supposed breach with Judaism and manifesto of Christianity. To be sure, late ancient, gentile Christianity found excellent grist for its mill in these latter sayings of Paul.⁴⁶ But when, say, Marcion and Augustine use

⁴⁶ See Matthew V. Novenson, "The Pauline Epistles in Tertullian's Bible," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 68 (2015): 471–483.

these words of Paul's, they mean quite different things from what the apostle meant when he said them.⁴⁷ In Paul's own context, even these more controversial claims about the law are recognizably, intelligibly, even familiarly Jewish. Admittedly, the closest parallel evidence comes not from everyday, conventional Jewish piety but from apocalyptic, millenarian Jewish circles, but it is no less Jewish for that. As we have learned from modern social theory of religion, ancient Judaism was whatever ancient Jews did. In short, then, Paul did not abandon Judaism. Over the course of late antiquity, Christianity abandoned Judaism, and it did so using Paul's words. But that is a very different thing.

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⁴⁷ On this point, see the classic essay of Krister Stendahl, "The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West," *Harvard Theological Review* 56 (1963): 199–215.

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